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Critical Participatory Action Research as Public Science

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Cultivated within the long history of psychological research dedicated to social action, this chapter traces one stream of action research, critical Participatory Action Research (critical PAR), across the 20th and the 21st centuries in the field of psychology. Rooted in notions of democracy and social justice and drawing on critical theory (feminist, critical race, queer, disability, neo-Marxist, indigenous, and/or post-structural) critical PAR is an epistemology that engages research design, methods, analyses, and products through a lens of democratic participation. Joining social movements and public science, critical PAR projects document the grossly uneven structural distributions of opportunities, resources and dignity; trouble ideological categories projected onto communities (delinquent, at risk, damaged, innocent, victim) and contest how “science” has been recruited to legitimate dominant policies and practices.

In the following pages we sketch an intentional history of the seeds of critical participatory research as they have been nurtured, buried, and then re-discovered, throughout the past century of social psychology. We then turn, in some detail, to Polling for Justice, a contemporary piece of quantitative and qualitative social inquiry, designed as a participatory survey of and by youth in New York City with adult researchers, poised to track social psychological circuits of injustice and resistance as they affect the educational, criminal justice and health experiences of urban youth (Fox, et al 2010). We purposely focus on a very traditional psychological method – the self-completed questionnaire – to illustrate how methods, analyses and products shift when engaging critical PAR as an epistemology. The chapter closes with a discussion of critical science, to make explicit the validity claims of critical PAR.

The history of critical PAR has been told through different legacies. Within education studies, critical PAR is associated with the tradition of liberation theology and Paulo Freire. Within postcolonial studies, critical PAR's lineage stretches back to the revolutionary praxis of Orlando Fals Borda in South America and Anisur Rahman in Asia. Within psychology, critical PAR is typically linked to the intellectual legacy of Kurt Lewin. In the first section of our essay we review a set of equally significant yet shadowed scholars, particularly women, and men of color, who helped carve the scientific path toward critical PAR as practiced within psychology today. Each of these scholars invented social psychological methods to contest what Martín-Baró (1994) called the *collective lie*, of prevailing ideological constructions of *social problems*, and awaken a sense of injustice – through research – to mobilize everyday people for change. Our intent in excavating this scholarship is to create an intellectual genealogy for contemporary PAR through a line of critical science projects in which engaged social scientists have collaborated with communities to interrogate the gap between dominant ideologies and human lives, using deeply participatory methodologies accountable to the goals of social justice.

On the grounds of history

As many scholars have documented, (Finison, 1978; Harris, 1986; Danziger, 1990; Cherry & Borshuck, 1998; Cherry, 2008; Saegert, forthcoming; Torre & Fine, in press) from the discipline's beginning one can find psychologists, philosophers and educators who have argued for epistemological and methodological approaches to social inquiry that incorporate complex human activity within social political contexts, include multiple levels of analysis, allow for human diversity, and speak with a sense of social responsibility. However over time, narrow understandings of expertise, logics, and experimentalism have prevailed. Much of the early

critical scholarship was pushed to the margins, relegated to footnotes, or lost from textbooks all together.

Writing in the 1800's, Wilhelm Dilthey called for the budding field of psychology to distinguish itself as a holistic science that situated the study of human experience in a social historical context. Wary of the growing trend towards natural *scientific* thinking and positivism which resulted in fracturing the human condition into disconnected, measurable parts, Dilthey proposed methodologies that would iterate back and forth between the relations of the part and the whole, crafting a complex, contextualized understanding of humans, human thought and experience (Dilthey 1883, Fox, 2010).

Firm in his belief in the importance of context and that no two human thoughts or experiences could be the same, Dilthey argued that causal explanations had limited applicability in understanding human beings and social relations (Fox, 2010). Dilthey was not alone in his concerns about experimentalism and reductionist practices in psychology. Wilhelm Wundt, the much heralded father of modern experimental psychology expressed similar concerns about the limits of experimentation. Perhaps drawing from his often overlooked work in social psychology and anthropology, Wundt called for a psychology that included social historical context and a use of what today we would call qualitative methods (Danziger, 1990; Harris, 2009).

Several years later, W.E.B. Du Bois, a student of William James, launched a series of studies based in history and focused on the social conditions of African Americans in the U.S. at the Sociological Laboratory at Atlanta University, where he was Director and Professor of Economics and History from 1896-1914. The most famous of these studies - *the Philadelphia Study* (1896-7), *the Farmville, Virginia Study* (1897), and *the Atlanta University Studies* (1896-1914) - investigated the impact of racial inequalities and structural racism on urban and rural

African Americans, documenting and analyzing regional economics and history, birth and death rates, conjugal relations, occupations, wages and class distinctions, businesses and trades, and communal organizations and experiences of group life (Green & Driver, 1978).

Du Bois' scholarship signifies an early analysis of social psychological and political dynamics that shape social problems. Du Bois' studies were designed intentionally to locate the "Negro Problem," not in African Americans as individuals or a group, but *in the conditions under which they live*. Taking the relationship between human experience and context seriously, Du Bois's studies represent some of the first large-scale community surveys in the U.S. With teams of undergraduates, he documented the impact of social and economic conditions on African American communities and in turn created a detailed account of structural racism at the turn of the century (Du Bois, 1898). In doing so, we see in Du Bois an early example positioning social science as a method for social change. The Atlanta Sociological Laboratory became a center for social inquiry, producing historically informed research with both qualitative and quantitative methods. Du Bois's Laboratory studies, presented annually at the Atlanta University Conferences, demonstrate his belief that empirical research when joined with structural analyses could impact social change, and that policy could be grounded in scientific fact rather than opinion and ideology (Wortham, 2005), a belief that undergirds critical PAR today.

With parallel intellectual commitments, Marie Jahoda, Paul Lazarsfeld and Hans Zeisel (2003) undertook a social psychological analysis of everyday life in Marienthal, a community outside of Vienna Austria, circa 1930, where villagers suffered individually and collectively from what was then called the Worldwide Economic Crisis. Using ethnography and time charts, conversations with and observations of everyday people, Jahoda and colleagues refused academic language that would distance them from their informants. They relied instead upon the

words and metaphors of people in the community to demonstrate the devastating material, psychological, and existential consequences of severe and collective unemployment in Central Europe.

Carrying these progressive, critical intellectual commitments forward into the 1940s and early 1950s, social research experienced a vibrancy with the action oriented studies and writings of researchers such as Ruth Benedict and Gene Weltfish (1943), Goodwin Barbour Watson (1947), Robin Williams (1947), Claire Selltitz and Margot Haas Wormser (1949). Motivated by the atrocities of World War II and lingering racial segregation in the US, these scholars sought to unite theory and action in order to better understand and respond to the potential extremes of racial and ethnic hatred. During this period there is a palpable urgency in the social scientific literature around using social research to build and protect democracy.

In the 1940s, housing activist Margot Haas Wormser and researcher Claire Selltitz, both research associates at Kurt Lewin's Center for Community Interrelations (CCI), formalized a method called the Community Self-Survey as a "tool of modern democracy" (Allport, 1951, p.vii). CCI was the research department of the American Jewish Congress and served as the "activist arm" of Lewin's Center for Group Dynamics at MIT (Cherry & Borshuk, 1998; Marrow, 1969). Within CCI, Wormser and Selltitz led the effort to systematize the self-survey approach reflecting the Center's dual desire to positively impact group dynamics and keep method and action in constant conversation. Their work marked an important period in the history of social science, whereby engaged research was understood to have a key role in democratic nation building (Torre, 2006). In other words, that social psychology in its most *scientific* form had a responsible and active role to play in interrupting injustice and in helping people understand their relationships to each other.

The community self-survey was introduced as a strategy to provoke individuals and communities to examine their individual lived experiences within a broader understanding of [the denial of] civil rights in their community based on *facts*, or “objective evidence about the total situation” (Wormser & Selltitz, 1951, p. 1). Echoing the work of Du Bois and Jahoda, the desire and continual design for facts that undergirds the survey work speaks to the somewhat uncritical belief of the time that an objective “fact-based” understanding of social issues would be instrumental in solving social problems.

The self-surveys departed from past research approaches in their dedication to participation. The hallmark of the method was its large-scale community participation and democratic educational practices throughout the research process, and particularly in data collection. The method was initially developed by future Fisk president Charles S. Johnson and colleagues at the Race Relations Department (later Institute) established by the American Missionary Association at Fisk University. Throughout the 1940s and 50s self-surveys, sometimes referred to as community audits, were conducted in cities across the U.S., providing some of the first opportunities for people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds to engage together in meaningful integrated work, in this case, social research for social justice.

Typically, researchers were invited into a community by a “sponsoring committee” made up of traditional community leaders as well as those already interested in race relations. Diverse committees and subcommittees of researchers and community members were formed in the areas of housing, schools, employment, churches, social welfare, and health services to conduct the research. They employed traditional and innovative methods, that were based in the local knowledge of the “fact-finders” (or what we would call co-researchers). At times the methods explicitly relied on the diversity of the research partners, pairing Black and White investigators.

Research findings were disseminated widely and resulted in the formation of municipal Fair Employment Practices laws, local councils on Race relations, as well as the ending discriminatory bans against African Americans in housing.

Building on the work of Johnson, Wormser and Selltitz made early arguments for what might be called radical inclusion within the research process. The theory behind self-surveys was that through *participation*, large numbers of *community members* become *invested* in the issues and outcomes of the research—in *documenting and challenging* the discrimination and inequalities of their own community. CCI was particularly careful about selecting sampling sites that would deepen understandings of inter-group relations:

A self-survey differs from other surveys in its change-producing potential only to the extent that a representative cross section of the community participates. It is important, therefore that the sponsors should include as many *different elements* in the community as possible as well as the *largest number* of people possible. Participation by a representative cross section of the community necessarily means participation by people who have not previously been concerned with problems of discrimination and intergroup relations as well as those who have. Unless previously unconcerned people take part, one of the basic principles underlying self-surveys – the concept that participation in fact-finding is likely to develop a feeling of responsibility to do something about the facts found – becomes inoperative. (Wormser & Selltitz, 1951b, p. 615)

The self-survey work reveals an early example of a social psychology for social justice that foreshadows today's PAR commitments to the ongoing interrelationship between research and action. An inclusive participatory approach challenged taken-for-granted practices of government, housing and education; extended boundaries of *expertise* by legitimating

traditionally unrecognized knowledge; and recognized that those most intimately involved in the practices of the community would have the keenest insight into the questions asked, where evidence lay and what methods would be most appropriate. In addition, Wormser and Selltiz wrote to popularize the method far and wide, hoping communities across the nation would launch self-surveys and audits, “making available to communities a basic pattern which they could adapt to their own situations” (Wormser & Selltiz, 1951a, p. 13). It is refreshing to re/member a history of activist social science ideas that insisted, at once, to engage cross-site macro patterns of injustice while being *of use* to local communities.

Traveling ahead 30 years and into El Salvador, psychologist and Jesuit Priest Ignacio Martín-Baró used public opinion polls to wedge open public debate on the experiences of disenfranchised Salvadorans. Like Wormser and Selltiz, Martín-Baró developed research methods to explore social injustice with the hope of inspiring social change. His work departs however, in its explicit call for a liberatory praxis within science.

In *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*, Martín-Baró (1994) argued:

Thus to acquire a new psychological knowledge it is not enough to place ourselves in the new perspective of the people; *it is necessary to involve ourselves in a new praxis*, and activity of transforming reality that will let us know not only about what is, but also about what is not, and by which we must try to orient ourselves toward what ought to be. (p.29)

While the public opinion polls were designed to systematically reveal social conditions and the concrete inequalities of the lives of Salvadorans, Martín-Baró was also strategic about their potential as *social mirrors*, scientific instruments designed to reflect back lived realities that were being denied by dominant ideologies and *official* definitions of Salvadoran life. Interrupting the distorted social narratives or *collective lie* as Martín-Baró termed it, with aggregated data from

everyday people not only eased what he referred to as the schizophrenia of living one experience while being told you are/should be having another, but also allowed people to re-understand their individual experiences through a collective lens. In other words, the experience of seeing the reality of one's life in the mirror alongside others creates openings for new levels of analysis of one's experience, of connections to larger social-political frameworks, of transformative thought (Martín-Baró, 1994).

Before he was killed by government soldiers in 1989, Martín-Baró outlined a framework for liberation psychology. He argued that in order for psychology to understand and contribute to interrupting injustice, it needs to attend to the ways the production of knowledge is shaped by social, historical, and political systems. In other words, researchers must challenge the designs of their studies to answer questions about the purpose of research, who benefits, who is made vulnerable, and how might it facilitate social transformation. He put forth a science *of* the oppressed rather than *for* the oppressed, that designs research from the perspective of those most impacted by injustice.

Martín-Baró articulated three urgent tasks for the field which have since been built upon by participatory action researchers (Lykes & Mallona, 2008; Fine & Torre 2004, Brydon-Miller & McGuire 2009): recovering historical memory, de-ideologizing everyday experience, and utilizing people's virtues. Critical PAR takes on these task as we develop research designs and methods that unearth forgotten alternatives in the history of science and fight for social justice, that connect past and contemporary struggles for equal rights, that *interrupt consistency* (Arendt, 1958) or what has become *normal*, and as we make central under-recognized knowledges/virtues, and validate expanded notions of expertise (see as examples: Anand et al, 2002).

Steeped in transformative practices, theorizing and researching *with* those most marginalized in an effort to mobilize for social justice, critical participatory action research enjoys a long, but too often forgotten, lineage in psychology. These projects of social research for the public good can easily be seen as precursors to what we now call critical participatory action research. We turn now to consider a contemporary PAR project, Polling for Justice (PFJ).

Polling for Justice

In order to demonstrate how one might pursue a critical PAR project, the next section of the chapter will describe Polling for Justice, one of our recent projects and a present-day embodiment of this historical lineage. There is no single way to conduct critical PAR. Rather, we believe critical participatory researchers are bound by a set of critical and participatory commitments throughout the research process such as: finding ways to harness varying forms of expertise; co-constructing what questions most need asking; collaborating to develop both theory and method; co-analyzing data together; and creating ongoing and multiple forms of dissemination with a principled purpose of working against unjust, oppressive structures. The next four sections will describe how the researchers of PFJ addressed these commitments.

Polling for Justice is a participatory action research project designed to examine the extent to which urban youth (ages 16 – 21) experience injustice across sectors of education, criminal justice, and health. An interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty and students at the City University of New York, a committed group of youth researchers, and youth-centered community organizations,¹ the primary methodological instrument was a text-based and internet-based survey co-constructed by youth and adults. With participation at the heart of theory,

¹ Including the Urban Youth Collaborative and the Annenberg Institute for School Reform

methods, crafting questions and analyzing the data, PFJ gathered data from more than 1110 New York City youth.

As a multi-generational research collective, we have produced scholarly and activist, empirical and performative products: academic articles, political testimony, youth organizing pamphlets and, in the spirit of Du Bois' pageants, we have developed a process for Performing the Evidence.

Deep Participation of Varied Forms of Expertise in Co-Constructing Research Questions

Polling for Justice began with a two-day intensive research camp for New York City young people, university faculty, graduate students, community organizers, and public health professionals. We posed a single, simple challenge to the group: we would like to collectively design a large-scale, city-wide research project, creating a youth survey of standardized and home grown items and conducting a series of focus groups, to document youth experiences across various public sectors of the city. We explained that the youth and adults were recruited because of their distinct experiences, knowledge and forms of expertise. The young people and adults formed groups to pool what they knew about prisons and their impact on youth, about foster care, immigration and deportation, homeless shelters, educational experiences, peer relationships, access to health education, worries about feeling safe, exposure to and involvement with violence and their concern for communities. We created a graffiti wall where anyone could jot down the questions they would want to ask of other NYC teens.

Signs with different topics printed on them were hung on doors and each participant chose which room to contribute their expertise. In one room people were working on issues of education and schooling, in another safety and violence, in a third youth experiences with the criminal justice system, and in a fourth the focus was on public health. These rooms were filled

with experts from many perspectives: youth from New York City more knowledgeable than any about the daily experiences of their own lives, scholars from the academy, experts from the community, as well as findings and tools from published studies. In these rooms, various kinds of expertise blended, clashed, and ultimately heightened the expert validity of the survey we collaboratively produced.

In one room a group gathered to take on the task of deciding how the Polling for Justice survey should ask New York City youth about experiences with the criminal justice system. After scouring existing instruments and surveys, the group found the questions largely inadequate. They found little that reflected their own knowledge and experiences inside and at the gateways of the criminal justice system. They wanted to ask questions about school; *and* public space; *and* police, school safety agents and transit authority employees. This group decided they needed to generate original questions. In collaboration with Sarah Zeller-Berkman, they developed a matrix of detailed questions about both positive and negative experiences with police. Items included: *“In the last six months: I was helped by a police officer; I was given a summons/ticket; I was arrested; I was stopped for the clothes I am wearing; I was touched inappropriately by police?”*

Following the first days of intensive work by the four expert groups, the survey went through countless revisions with input from the broad group of youth researchers, graduate students, faculty, youth organizers, community members, public health professionals, and city officials. Through the lengthy survey revision process, where we re-worded and re-worked the survey over six months, the questions about youth interactions with the police remained unchanged.

In the final version, 17 questions assessed youth experiences with specific social policies of dispossession which disrupt social and institutional relationships: in education (e.g. Have you ever dropped out or been pushed out of high school), family/home life (e.g. Have you ever been homeless?) and policing/prison (e.g. Have you ever been in jail or prison?). We also decided to measure youths' experience of *human insecurity* by asking the extent to which money, health, housing, education, police cause stress in youth lives.

Collaboratively Building Theory: Circuits of Dispossession & Privilege

Listening in on conversations among the youth during initial meetings and since, it was easy – and painful – to hear the uneven distribution of *human security* across race, ethnicity, class, gender, immigration status, sexuality, and zip code. For low-income youth of color, and for LGBTQ youth, a palpable sense of human insecurity contaminates growing up.

The PFJ survey was designed to document the ways in which key social policies, institutions, and practices systematically facilitate and/or deny youth human rights and opportunities and the ways in which youth mobilize to resist, negotiate, and challenge collectively technologies of dispossession. We intended to investigate how urban youth experience, respond to, and organize against the profoundly uneven opportunities for development across three sectors: education, health care, and criminal justice within the five boroughs of New York City. That is, the PFJ researchers set out to theoretically and empirically examine what we call *circuits of dispossession* (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) and *pools of youth resistance* in New York City.

Our partnerships were strategic. Like the collaborations of Wormser and Selltiz, Kenneth Clark, and Martín-Baró, PFJ was explicitly designed to gather and funnel social science evidence into organizing campaigns for youth justice – violence against girls and women, police

harassment, college access, high stakes testing, and access to comprehensive sexuality education, to name just a few.

Participatory Analysis: “Stats-n-Action”

As data-analysis began, we found we needed to devise participatory methods for engaging the youth researchers in quantitative analysis. When we first experimented with working through the data with high-school aged researchers we found the process engaged the group unevenly. We shifted analytic strategies and started running analyses in real-time, inductively. In a series of seminars we call Stats ‘n Action, our research team of high school aged young people and academics have waded through, understood and analyzed statistical output together. This engagement with quantitative data across age and comfort with mathematics becomes crucial as we generate theories based on a participatory process from our findings.

To illustrate: in the preliminary data, after over 400 responses had come in, we were noticing young people reporting high numbers of interactions with the police. The Polling for Justice survey asked about racial and ethnic identity via the following categories: Black or African American, African Caribbean, Asian, South Asian or Pacific Islander, White, Middle Eastern, Latino/a, Native American or American Indian, Alaskan Native, Other (with room to specify). Survey-takers could check as many boxes as they needed to describe their identity, and any survey-taker who checked more than one box was coded “multi-racial.” In the preliminary findings, we were puzzled because the data showed that youth who reported the highest level of interaction (positive and negative) with the police were youth who identified as multi-racial. These youth were reporting more interactions than youth who identified singularly as Latino/a or African American/Black/African Caribbean. The Polling for Justice youth researchers generated

a theory to explain this finding, suggesting that we look more closely at the category multi-racial to see which specific boxes were checked. Several youth researchers hypothesized that many in that category would identify as “Black and Latino/a.” We ran the analysis in real-time during the research meeting and found that youth who checked both Latino/a *and* African American/Black/African Caribbean were indeed the most likely to report interactions with the police. The youth researchers were, in general, not surprised by this finding and additionally wondered how skin tone might play a factor. We came to our understanding of Black, Latino/a and Black and Latino/a youth experience of police through our cross-generational, participatory analysis of quantitative data. Further, the youth researchers’ speculation about skin color raised interesting potential questions for further research.

Polling for Justice now sponsors a regular series “Stats ‘n Action” for high school aged researchers, undergraduates, doctoral students, community activists and even junior faculty. Our multi-generational participatory quantitative analysis sessions have been inspired by John Tukey’s statistical techniques, particularly his theoretical approach. In the mid 1970s Tukey developed Exploratory Data Analyses (EDA), an inductive, iterative, descriptive, graphical approach to statistics. EDA emphasizes looking at variation and outliers, taking seriously sample participants on their own terms, rather than standing in as representatives for a larger population. Our experiences confirm Tukey’s belief that “exploratory data analysis is detective work – numerical detective work – or counting detective work – or graphical detective work” (Tukey, 1977, p. 1). Our budding efforts to merge participatory action research and exploratory data analysis (PAR-EDA) have proven a surprising and very fruitful methodology for doing multi-generational research.

Performing the Evidence: Insisting on Audience Participation in Action

In 1915, W.E.B. Du Bois produced *The Star of Ethiopia* a pageant of African American history, with a cast of hundreds of everyday people, performing a rich counter-story about the history and culture of African Americans. With pageantry, performance, journalism, and circus-theater, Du Bois challenged the *collective lies* being told about African Americans by circulating new stories of injustice and resistance, and provoking alternative possibilities about ‘what could be’ into the public African American imagination. In a similar spirit, Polling for Justice has also taken a performative turn. Eager to twin society inquiry and theatre, we have collaborated with performing artists to creatively present our evidence to varied audiences. Our performative work and engagement with embodied methods builds on scholars such as Kathleen Gallagher (2008), Geraldine Pratt (2000) who write provocatively about using theatre and role-play in research and youth spaces, as well as Kip Jones (2006) and Norm Denzin (2003) who encourage social scientists to experiment with performance as a means to share research in a multi-media world.

As we analyzed the data, the Polling for Justice youth researchers decided to develop skills in community theatre, including Playback Theatre (Fox, 1994; Salas, 2007) and Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2002), as a methodology for collaborative analysis and dissemination of our findings. Over the course of one year, youth learned improvisational theatre skills, collaborated with guest artists from various traditions, and used an embodied approach to analysis and dissemination of the Polling for Justice study.

The PFJ performances were conceived as an extension of the *ethic of participation*. The audiences included teachers, parents, school administrators, young people, social scientists, community members, police, Department of Education officials, and policy makers—viewers, listeners, observers, as well as thinkers, learners, and those who will effect. In order to activate the participation of audience members, the performances had three phases: the researchers

started with a presentation of largely quantitative data in embodied, visual, storied ways that employed metaphor, humor, maps, graphs, and numbers. In the second phase audience members were invited to respond and react to the data using a form of improvisation called Playback Theatre (2003) to transform the audience members' affective responses into theatre on the spot. Finally, in the third phase, the PFJ researchers invited audience members to contribute their own expertise and experience in generating knowledge and visions for action in light of the PFJ data.

If we consider the PFJ survey as an instance of Martín-Baró's (1994) *social mirror*, one which provides a critical reflection of the lived realities of urban youth of color, then with performances of the data the PFJ researchers held up a "social mirror-in-the-round," creating a visual/lived link between researcher and audience; between youth, adults, and structural inequalities. Through action and performance the PFJ researchers asked audiences to think critically about their own position in the social arrangements that produce (and can possibly interrupt) negative youth experiences with police, education, and public health. The move to performance reflects a desire to challenge a social psychological dissociation from the evidence, to interrupt and incite the passive audiences and bystanders, to refuse diffusion of responsibility (Darley & Latané, 1968), and to engage a dynamics of political solidarity (Subasic, Reynolds & Turner, 2008).

In keeping with a commitment to use research findings to support ongoing organizing and advocacy within NYC, PFJ collaborated with youth activist groups (such as the Brotherhood/Sister Sol and Girls for Gender Equity), published academic articles from the PFJ data in scholarly journals and books (Fox et. al, forthcoming); participated in community speak-outs; sponsored workshops for youth and testify in city-sponsored hearings, sent op-ed pieces to national and daily newspapers; and presented papers at professional conferences. In other words

PFJ was quite deliberate about circulating PFJ evidence through the academy, communities, youth organizing, and policy institutions.

The commitments of critical PAR as a public science

This chapter has journeyed through history and method, recuperating buried commitments that have been central to some of the most progressive works within social psychology, and elaborating through the example of Polling for Justice, these commitments for critical PAR today. While we will not dwell on the nature of the erasures, we do recommend that readers consult the writings of Nancy Tuana (2006) on the production of epistemological ignorance, to understand how distinct threads of psychological research have been stitched into the canon, while others have been dropped (see also, Cherry, 2008; Jackson, 2004; Rutherford & Pickren, 2008). We end by bridging the intellectual genealogy of critical PAR to key decisions of theory and design used in Polling for Justice in order to make explicit how critical PAR carries forward and expands intellectual legacies embedded in the recesses of psychology's history, and contributes to a responsible framework of scientific validity.

Any discussion about epistemology and methodology should include a focus on validity. For many, approaching research methods through a critical PAR framework *is in itself* thought to be a move towards stronger validity. While we recognize and respect the importance of traditional notions of validity, the commitments essential to critical PAR as an epistemological stance raises certain tensions with conventional validity. The commitments to democratic participation and action force us to explicitly contend with issues that may remain hidden in more traditionally conducted psychological research. Sometimes the tensions suggest a need to re-define familiar notions of validity while other times they require new types of validity. To

illustrate, we close this chapter by outlining these negotiations in the Polling for Justice project. We will consider each epistemological commitment on its own terms, as elaborated in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1]

As we sketch key decisions made in Polling for Justice, we heed Sandra Harding's notion of "strong objectivity" (1993) taking seriously the very concepts that lie at the heart and arguably the *soul* of social inquiry. Further, we echo Du Bois' call for the integration of science and ethics, placing issues of objectivity, validity, generalizability, and justice at the center of the scientific enterprise.

Critical Theory

Critical inquiry deliberately shifts the gaze from "what's wrong with that person?" to "what are the policies, institutions, and social arrangements that help to form and deform, enrich and limit, human development?" and "how do people resist the weight of injustice in their lives?" Du Bois (1898) struggled to reframe the "Negro problem" by analyzing racialized patterns of housing, education, access to health care, and criminal justice. Jahoda, Lazarsfeld, Zeisel (1933) told the story of making lives and meaning in an Austrian community by interrogating how people live in communities infected by massive unemployment. Kenneth Clark collaborated with Eddie Ellis (1993) and other men in prison to refract the origins of the "crime problem" off of the individual men deemed criminals and back onto state neglect of communities long abandoned by the economy and quality schooling. Wormser and Selltiz (1951a) engaged everyday people from different racial groups to track the economic, social, and psychological impress of discrimination on community life and public institutions.

In line with these works, critical PAR lifts responsibility for social problems off the backs of individuals who have paid the greatest price for injustice and exposes the social and political

conditions that produce and justify injustice. As displayed in the top row of Table 1, Critical PAR purposefully theorizes how these conditions enter the bodies, aspirations, and relationships of people by documenting the geography of injustice and by chronicling the varied forms of resistance.

In this spirit, PFJ has been designed explicitly to understand youth experiences as negotiated within the uneven geography of opportunities; to document how race, class, gender, sexuality, and community map onto educational, health, criminal justice, and psychological outcomes. We believe working with interdisciplinary teams of adults and youth as co-researchers has strengthened our understandings of key constructs in youth development such as resilience, critical consciousness, and resistance. This iterative exchange from theory to participatory deconstruction of the data back to theory, strengthens our *construct validity* and creates an opportunity to theorize adolescent development from the vantage point of marginalized youth.

Our participatory knowledge-building also enhances what we would consider our *ecological validity*, borrowing from Bronfenbrenner (1979). With youth on the research team, we learned intimately about the ways in which circuits of dispossession operate across levels: embedded in state policy (e.g. high stakes testing and finance equity), traversing through institutional relations between youth and educators, penetrating young people's educational aspirations and achievements and then how these educational outcomes spill into physical and mental health and criminal justice outcomes. Working across vertical levels of analysis (policy – institution – lives) and across horizontal sites of development (education, health, and criminal justice) strengthens the conceptual and political reach of the work, reflecting a heightened measure of ecological validity.

Deep Participation

Looking across the history of critical psychology, we can see that researchers have experimented with varied forms of participation. In the community self-surveys, community members were core data gatherers such that diverse groups of citizens banded together to jointly investigate the racial distributions in employment, housing, and education. Pioneers in bringing together White and Black community researchers, Wormser and Selltiz encouraged those who had benefited and those who had been disadvantaged by local injustices to collaborate in the expectation that joint labor would help them realize their shared fates. They believed such collaborations would strengthen the validity and utility of the research; cultivate informed, diverse, and skilled community leaders; and build elite allies in the struggle against racial discrimination.

This commitment to deep participation speaks to another aspect of validity criteria – in this case *expert validity* (see Table 1, second row). Critical participatory work contests and expands traditional views of expertise, recognizing situated knowledges and systemic relationships. An example is in research that shifts the unit of analysis to *circuits of dispossession* (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) and *human rights*. While some may benefit, others suffer, witness, sacrifice, feel empathy, guilt, responsibility or believe it's not their problem. Post-colonial theorists recognize that we are all engaged in and [differentially] affected by these circuits (MacLeod & Bhatia, 2008). Torre's (2005, 2006) use of contact zones extends this framework to epistemology and method, such that those individuals who reflect these varied positions are recruited onto the research team to collaboratively construct research questions, settle on methods, engage analysis and determine products. In the shared analytical space of the research

team, difficult, power-sensitive conversations ensue across varied forms of expertise, as questions are deliberately framed to document the broad and uneven impact of injustice.

Research as/for Action: Accountability to social movements and change.

Finally, we draw wisdom and inspiration from those who have designed science to serve the interests of social justice. Drawing on the thinking of Ricardo Barreras and Sean Massey (forthcoming), critical participatory projects are crafted toward *Impact Validity*, anticipating from the start how to produce evidence that can be mobilized for change. In this vein, Polling for Justice has been designed to generate four kinds of actions and to be accountable to varied communities of action:

- *Building Theory* – Research collectives of adult and youth are collaboratively writing scholarly and youth-friendly popular documents about our findings on dispossession, privilege, and resistance.
- *Contributing to social policy* – Focused upon educational, criminal justice, school safety, or high stakes testing, PFJ researchers have spoken at City Council meetings, been involved in class action suits, sent our data to newspapers, and to Albany for lobbying data. One sub-project within PFJ, undertaken by children of incarcerated parents, has involved research and a video produced by youth affected by mass incarceration. The film is being viewed by varied audiences of youth, advocates, incarcerated parents – and has been sent with a policy brief to more than 200 legislators in Albany (Munoz-Proto, forthcoming).
- *Performing Data* – following in the footsteps of Du Bois' (1915) *Star of Ethiopia*, the PFJ researchers have been working with improvisational, visual, and other artists to perform the data for varied audiences throughout NYC, the US, and internationally. We

are piloting participatory performance, designed to invite audiences to see themselves not as witnesses, nor as empathetic, but as deeply engaged agents within dialectical systems of dispossession and privilege, which we are all responsible to interrupt (Fox, 2010).

- *Distributing evidence to organizing allies* – in collaboration with a series of youth organizing groups, public interest lawyers and journalists, we have created a clearinghouse of youth justice data, to be integrated into city council testimony for Ethical Policing in schools; youth/parent/community organizing against school closings and high stakes testing; and community education against sexual and sexuality harassment of youth by police and peers. We consider this a form of generalizability for organizing.

Conclusion

Critical PAR stands on the broad shoulders of 20th century women and men who dared to design research for justice. Today we collaborate with youth who confront 21st century assaults on their dignity, humanity, and human securities in a society increasingly defined by huge wealth and opportunity gaps (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). We offer this chapter to sketch critical participatory action research as public science grounded in epistemologies that value the messy participation of various forms of knowledge and expertise. Critical PAR challenges hegemonic conceptions of where social problems originate, cultivates deep participation, produces evidence designed to awaken a sense of injustice (Deutsch, 1998) and seeks to provoke collective engagement. Refusing the distinctions between theoretical and applied, and science and advocacy; critical participatory action research commits at once to human rights, social justice, and scientific validity.

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Table 1

Epistemological Commitments of Critical PAR

Epistemological commitments of Critical PAR	Intellectual Legacy	Theory and design decisions in Polling for Justice	Validities for a critical participatory science
Reframing the problem through critical theory	WEB Du Bois; Jahoda & Lazarsfeld; Ellis & Clark; Martín-Baró	<p>Integrated critical race, feminist and queer theory into our framing of youth problems</p> <p>Analyzed urban youth experiences in the context of racialized history, policies, institutional practices and race/gender/ sexuality/class arrangements</p> <p>Resisted victim blaming analyses by assessing outcomes in the macro, meso and micro context of power, uneven opportunities and varied forms of dispossession</p> <p>Traced the dialectics of circuits of dispossession and human rights over space and contexts</p>	<p>Construct validity – to insure that analyses recognize the impact of history and structures of injustice on individuals and communities</p> <p>Ecological validity – to document the multiple levels of the “problem” including macro, meso and micro</p>
Deep and broad participation	Wormser & Selltitz; Lykes & Mallona; Brydon-Miller & McGuire	<p>Blended local youth knowledge (privileged and marginalized) in conversation with varied forms of “legitimated” expertise, e.g. lawyers, public health researchers, social psychologists, judges, educators, etc.</p> <p>Organized the research team to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Craft questions - Consult/challenge dominant literatures in the field - Shape methods - Design the research to be in conversation with prevailing policies and academic arguments - Determine sample strategies - Gather evidence - Analyze data - Determine research products 	Expert validity – to value and democratically bring together varied bases of knowledge including local, critical, professional and outside perspectives
Action and accountability to social change and social movements	Du Bois; Lewin; Martín-Baró; Lykes	<p>Built theory through producing scholarly and youth-friendly writings, performances and other research products.</p> <p>Established a network of allies to engage the data for greatest social impact.</p>	Impact validity – to insure that the research is designed as action, for action, and in solidarity with movements for social change